



Kim Jong-un's Visit to China: An Assessment

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On March 28, 2018, North Korean and Chinese official media announced that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un visited China from 25-28 March 2018ⁱ. The information about the visit was not made public prior to the visit or during his stay in China. The visit marked Kim's first reported international travel and his first meeting with a head of the state since assuming power in December 2011. Though the visit was 'unofficial' Kim was bestowed a treatment at par or even higher than many top leaders of the world visiting China.

The decision to end six years of international isolation by visiting Beijing marks a departure in North Korea's foreign policy under Kim and starts a new phase in Pyongyang-Beijing relations. More important was the timing of the visit, as it came ahead of North Korea's scheduled summits with South Korea and the US. Kim's meeting with Xi also manifests the transformation of North Korea from being a pariah state to one which is driving developments in the Korean Peninsula at least in the last couple of months. Analysing the outcome of Kim's visit to Beijing, the article explains its implications for North Korea-China relations and the evolving dynamics in the Korean Peninsula.

Situation in the Korean Peninsula: Trends

A new scenario has emerged in the Korean Peninsula since January 2018, featuring de-escalation of security tension facilitated by diplomatic engagement. The diplomatic initiatives driven by South Korea and North Korea in the last three months produced substantive results including the announcement of the inter-Korean summit and US-Korea summit.

The security tension in the peninsula reached a new height in the second half of 2017 with North Korea's continued nuclear and missile tests. The nuclear test conducted in September 2017

was North Korea's sixth and the largest so far and claimed to be a miniaturised hydrogen bomb that can be fitted on an inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM).ⁱⁱ Among the 24 missile tests that North Korea conducted in 2017, included the successful launching of three ICBMs and an intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM).ⁱⁱⁱ Following the successful testing of the ICBM, Hwasong -15 on November 29, 2017, Pyongyang declared the completion of its "state nuclear force".^{iv} With a range more than 13,000 km, Hwasong -15 is capable enough to reach Washington D.C.^v

The tension was further exasperated by the trading of threats between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. The possibility of war in the Korean Peninsula was heightened since August 2017 following Washington's repeated reference to "military option".^{vi} However, the channels for talks were never closed from the US side.^{vii} The international community responded to North Korea's continued provocation during the last year by adopting five UNSC sanctions. These sanctions adopted unprecedented measures in putting pressure on North Korea. For instance, UNSC 2397 adopted in response to North Korea's launch of the Hwasong-15 missile takes measures to restrict fuel imports and other trade, as well as restricted North Korean citizens to work abroad. In response, North Korea declared that the passing of UNSC 2397 constitutes an act of war.^{viii}

The rapid change in the situation was facilitated by an improvement in inter-Korean relation in the context Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. Kim Jong-un in his 2018 New Year speech announced North Korea's willingness to participate in the Winter Olympics and to improve inter-Korean relations.^{ix} In January 2018, Seoul and Pyongyang conducted two rounds of dialogue which resulted in North Korea's participation in the Winter Olympics. North Korea and South Korea marched as a single team in the opening ceremony and also fielded a joint women's ice hockey team. In a surprising turn of events, North Korea also sent a high-level delegation led by the ceremonial head of North Korean government, Kim Yong-nam and special envoy, Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un's sister.^x

Sports diplomacy between Seoul and Pyongyang facilitated an agreement to hold the 3rd inter-Korean Summit in late April.^{xi} The agreement was made during a meeting between Kim Jong-un and the Special Envoys of President Moon Jae-in led by National security advisor Chung Eui-yong on March 5, 2018 in Pyongyang. Seoul's diplomatic mission to Pyongyang also resulted in the announcement of the North Korea-US Summit with US President Donald Trump accepting Kim Jong-un's invitation for a meeting.^{xii} If the meeting of President Trump and Kim were to take place, it would be the first ever Summit between the US and North Korea. In this background North Korean leader Kim Jong-un visited China.

Kim-Xi meeting: Outcome

During his meeting with Kim, Xi said that China, "speaks highly of this visit" as it "came at a special time" and attaches "great significance".^{xiii} Xi said Kim's visit manifests the continuity and the development of the "tradition of the relationship" between the two countries and observed that doing so "is a strategic choice and the only right choice" for China and North Korea.^{xiv} He

emphasised that China-North Korea relations “should not and will not change because of any single event at a particular time” and will “make new contribution to regional peace, stability and development.” Reiteration of “traditional relationship” indicates the urgency that the leadership sees in revamping their bilateral relations.^{xv} By saying, “no matter how the international and regional situation changes, we will both firmly grasp the global development trend and the overall situation of the China-DPRK relationship”, Xi indicated China’s willingness to reinstate its traditional alliance with North Korea.^{xvi}

Kim said that his visit was out of “comradeship and moral responsibility”^{xvii} to inform about recent developments in the Korean Peninsula. Kim emphasised that the foundation of China-DPRK relations is “unshakable” and “under the new circumstances, enhancing relationship is a strategic choice”.^{xviii} On the nuclear issue, according to the Chinese statement, Kim declared his commitment to “denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula”. He informed Xi that Pyongyang is ready to solve the nuclear issue “if South Korea and the United States respond” to North Korea’s “effort with goodwill, create an atmosphere of peace and stability while taking progressive and synchronous measures for the realisation of peace.”^{xix} In saying so, Kim is indicating a quid-pro-quo and an approach comprising simultaneous processes of denuclearisation and peace agreement, similar to China’s dual-track proposal. However, the North Korean statement was silent on Kim’s denuclearisation commitment.

In China, Kim also referred his upcoming summit with South Korea and the US. While briefing Xi personally on the latest development, Kim did not keep his visit’s primary objective of seeking Chinese backing for the upcoming summit a secret. North Korean state media stated that visit to China was “like lightning with the sole desire to invariably maintain the long-standing historical tradition of great DPRK-China friendship... under the new situation prevailing on the Korean peninsula”. In this direction, Kim suggested enhancing strategic communication with China during North Korea’s summit with South Korea and the US to “jointly safeguard the trend of consultation and dialogue as well as peace and stability on the peninsula.”^{xx}

For developing China-North Korea relations, Xi made four proposals. First, he highlighted importance of continuing high-level exchanges. In this regard, Xi declared his willingness to be in close contact with Kim. The North Korean state media reported that Xi accepted Kim’s invitation to visit Pyongyang.^{xxi} The second proposal focuses on the importance of interaction at the party level. Traditionally, China-North Korea relations were managed at the party level. However, in recent years particularly under Xi, interaction has been more at the government level. The emphasis on revamping the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party and North Korea’s Workers Party indicates the increasing strategic value Beijing attributes to North Korea. The third proposal is concerned with developmental cooperation between the two countries. Xi emphasised on the need for reform and opening of North Korea by suggesting joint developmental efforts confirming “to the trend of the times”. The fourth proposal is to increase cultural exchange between the two countries.

The New Context of North Korea-China Relations

Until the end of Cold War North Korea-China relations featured an alliance representative of Mao Zedong's famous dictum "close as lips and teeth". The alliance was forged on the shared ideological and historical narrative of Korean War with the signing of a defence agreement in 1961, whereby China committed to defend North Korea in the event of a military conflict. However, the nature of the relationship has changed in the post-Cold War period, particularly after North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006 to the extent that the two countries can hardly be characterised as friends let alone allies. Many Chinese analysts even describe North Korea as a liability.^{xxii} The relationship witnessed a historic low phase since the assumption of Kim Jong-un in North Korea in 2011 and Xi Jinping in 2013, owing to heightened nuclear and missile provocation and purging of leaders close to Beijing under Kim Jong-un. Beijing's improved relations with Seoul also contributed to the deterioration of the relationship. China's increasing participation in the UN-led sanction on North Korea is an indicator of Beijing's frustration over Pyongyang's belligerent behaviour.

Though Beijing's leverage over North Korea has drastically reduced, it remains the sole life line for the struggling North Korean economy. China continues to make efforts to keep North Korea on its side, even though it has increasingly become a burden for its strategic interest. The decision on not "giving up" North Korea manifests a dilemma in Chinese strategic view on the Korean Peninsula. Both ends of the strategic spectrum either supporting nuclear North Korea or giving up would jeopardise Chinese objective of maintaining peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula. A nuclear North Korea brings the risk of war or nuclear accident across the Chinese border and also undermines Chinese influence on South Korea. Giving up on the other hand by pulling out economic engagement or letting Pyongyang succumb to the full effect of international diplomatic and economic sanctions attaches the risk of North Korean regime collapse. Beijing's North Korean dilemma is also complicated by the competing dynamics of China-US relations in the region. Given its strategic and security importance, a solution to the North Korean nuclear problem on its terms is the highest priority for Beijing's national security and a possible exclusion is a strategic nightmare.

The new situation featuring dialogue and engagement has been driven by the swift diplomatic manoeuvring of Seoul and Pyongyang. The announcement of inter-Korean Summit and President Donald Trump's acceptance of Kim Jong-un's invitation for US-North Korea Summit created a situation whereby Beijing felt being excluded leaving the matters to be settled between the two Koreas and the US.

The visit: A big relief for Chinese diplomacy?

The visit of Kim Jong-un may prove to be a big relief for Chinese diplomacy due to at least three following reasons.

Proof against marginalisation

In the background of new development in the Korean Peninsula, a Chinese daily in early March noted: “Chinese people should stay calm and remain poised, and avoid the mentality that China is being marginalised.” Further, it acknowledged that “China's huge influence on North Korea has ceased. China does not station troops in North Korea after it pulled negotiation representatives from Panmunjeom in the mid-1990s...”^{xxiii}

It is noteworthy that the 19th Party Congress of China (November 2017) gave a message across the world that China has arrived at the world's stage. Various statements after the Party Congress by the Chinese leaders have affirmed this. State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that China has “achieved a remarkable transformation - it has stood up, grown rich and is becoming strong. A sea change has taken place in China...”^{xxiv} In this context, the loss of influence on North Korea was seen as a big challenge for Chinese diplomacy.

Further, it may be noted that Song Tao, Head of the Chinese Communist Party's International Department visited North Korea in November 2017 as a Special Envoy of Chinese President Xi Jinping. There was great expectation from the trip which was organised just a week after President Trump's visit to China. The visit was watched closely by regional stakeholders, but no breakthrough was reported. Moreover, North Korea conducted its longest-range missile test on November 29,^{xxv} just after a week of Song Tao's visit to North Korea

The recent visit of Kim to China could be seen as a success for Chinese diplomacy. It brought China back to a position where its relevance as a significant player in the affairs of Korean Peninsula was reinforced to a fair extent. Therefore, Chinese experts, including Su Xiaohui, (Deputy Director of International and Strategic Studies, China Institute of International Studies, Beijing) highlight that the Xi-Kim meeting has eliminated suspicions about marginalisation of China's role in regional affairs.^{xxvi}

Influencing the agenda

The visit has highlighted probable agenda for North Korea's future talks with South Korea and the US, where China is able to endorse its own position. Consequently, China has emphasized that its position taken in the past is a way forward to solve the problem. Three important issues could be discussed in this context.

(i) Denuclearisation:

The Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson on 28 March 2017 noted: “we stand ready to work with the North Korea and other parties to, in combination with China's dual-track approach and other parties' useful advice, strive for the denuclearisation, peace and stability of the Peninsula...”^{xxvii} The Xinhua statement on the issue also highlighted that China reaffirmed its commitment to the goal of “denuclearization of the Korean peninsula”.^{xxviii} The visiting leader committed himself to denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, in accordance with the will of late President Kim Il-sung and late General Secretary Kim Jong-il. These statements reaffirm China's official position and therefore, Chinese experts, such as Su Xiaohui, have highlighted that China's proposal of ‘dual suspension’^{xxix} have been ‘vindicated’.

It is also noteworthy that Korean official media statement on the visit did not make any reference to the issue of denuclearisation. It may be argued that Kim Jong-un does not want to go for the highest level talks with ROK and US with a non-negotiable position on denuclearization. The absence of the issue from Korean media statement may provide some manoeuvring space for both sides in their talks.

(ii) Expansion of negotiating Parties:

Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi during his talks with his counterpart from North Korea on 4 April 2018 said: “China hopes the reasonable security concerns of *all parties* can be resolved during the process of denuclearization and a peace mechanism can be established”.^{xxx} Further, some statements from China (after the Kim- Xi Summit) have highlighted its position aimed to involve more countries. Lu Chao, Director of the Border Studies Institute at the Liaoning Academy of Social Sciences (province adjoining North Korea), has been quoted saying that “denuclearization would require long and painstaking negotiations *involving several parties*.”^{xxxii}

(iii) Resumption of Six-Party Talks

The issue of reviving Six-Party talks has been also added to the debate in China.^{xxxiii} It is accepted that during the talks, Kim Jong-un expressed the hope that the Six-Party Talks can be resumed, although it was not included in the official media statements of both China and North Korea. While replying to a question on the revival of Six-Party Talks, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson on 28 March 2017 noted “The Six-Party Talks serves as an important platform for promoting the settlement of the Korean Peninsula issue and striving to resume it at an early date represents a direction that all relevant parties should work for. We hope that all relevant parties can follow the principles and spirit of the September 19 Joint Statement...”^{xxxiii}

Note: China attaches importance to the Joint Statement released on September 19, 2005, and it has also commemorated anniversaries of September 19 Joint Statement in the past. The Joint Statement noted that the “goal of the six-party talks is the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula”^{xxxiv}. However, Six-Party talks may not work in current/changed circumstances instead it might rather, delay the diplomatic process.

Consensus to maintain close strategic communication

The visit signalled that China and North Korea are ready to improve and strengthened their bilateral relationship. During their talks, both sides agreed to maintain close strategic communication as well as exchanges of high-level visits. This is significant as such consensus will provide more avenues for Chinese diplomacy to influence the fate of future talks as well as developments in the Korean Peninsula. Further, bilateral consensus on close strategic communication provides a message across the globe that China cannot be sidelined while deciding the fate of the Korean peninsula.

Therefore, it was an important visit from Chinese perspective. It was not a coincidence that top leaders of China, including Premier Li Keqiang, attended various activities during the

visit. Xi and his wife Peng Liyuan hosted a welcoming banquet for Kim and his wife Ri Sol-ju and watched an art performance together. Knowing the sensitivities of the matter, the media was extremely cautious, and social media was fully controlled. For example, Chinese internet censors quickly cracked down on any discussions on Kim Jong-un's wife related to her dress, beauty and style or her comparison with Peng Liyuan and Song Hye-kyo, a popular actress in China.^{xxxv}

It may be noted that Song Tao, Head of the Chinese Communist Party's International Department led a Chinese art troupe to North Korea to attend the Spring Friendship Art Festival on April 13. In the changed circumstances, Kim met Song and pledged to 'jointly write a new chapter of DPRK-China friendship'. It is evident that Song received much importance during his visit to North Korea in April 2018 compared to his visit in November 2017.

China's Role in the Korean Peninsula and Major Power Competition

China's 'dual-track' approach^{xxxvi} and 'dual suspension' proposal are indications of China's intention to play an important role in resolving the Korean Peninsula issue. China continues to refer to its relationship with North Korea as "lips and teeth" relationship because of strategic importance of the latter.^{xxxvii} When China is looking forward to a major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics which aims to foster a "new type of international relations"^{xxxviii}, the fear of marginalising China's role set in following Kim's reference to "By Our Nation Itself" principle.^{xxxix}

However, Chinese foreign ministry on April 18, 2018, reiterated its important role on the Korean Peninsula on the ground that it was a party to the 1953 Armistice Agreement.^{xl} It also stated that "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is the master key to solving all the problems related to the Korean Peninsula as well as the general route leading to the long-lasting peace and stability" and urged all parties to "unwaveringly adhere to this general direction". Secondly, it suggested all parties to adhere to the Chinese proposal of "dual-track approach" which emphasizes "fair and legitimate security concerns of North Korea in the process of achieving denuclearization". Thirdly, China urged all parties to "stay committed to seeking a package solution in stages and in a synchronized way."^{xli} According to Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the "peace process should be advanced under the precondition of denuclearization and with the concerted efforts of all relevant parties step by step".^{xlii} The position of China articulated by Wang implicitly underscores a common ground with North Korea.

In this context, the question of Beijing's partiality to North Korea and not using its leverage to restrain North Korea remains central to understanding the evolving China-North Korea relationship. Also, it reflects the clash of treaty obligations of China toward North Korea and China's effort to create an image of a responsible power. At the same time, national interests continue to shape and influence the policies made both in Beijing and Pyongyang.

Problems in China-North Korea Relations

Strategic and ideological considerations and fear of humanitarian crisis in North Korea have prevented China from adopting a harsh policy against Pyongyang. The two countries, however, have several issues in the past that affected their relationship. The ancient history of Koguryo

Kingdom is one such issue. The issue of history remains a sensitive point between China and the two Koreas. Historians from the two Koreas have challenged the Chinese government funded 'Northeast Project' which claims the history of Koguryo Kingdom as part of Chinese history.^{xliii} Also, the pro-Chinese group called the 'Yan'an Faction' in North Korea became an irritant in their relationship soon after the Korean War. Above all, China's establishment of diplomatic ties with South Korea in 1992 has affected their friendship and mutual trust.

Similarly, in recent past, the relationship has gone through a lull period after Kim Jong-un took control of the regime in December 2011. Kim's uncle Jang Song-thaek was known for his prominent role in shaping North Korea's policy towards China. However, Jang Song-thaek's execution in 2013 was a loss for the bilateral relations. Further, implementation of North Korea's special economic zones, including the one on Hwanggumpyong Island and completion of the New Yalu River Bridge have been affected due to Pyongyang's differences with Beijing. Also, Beijing has expressed disappointment over North Korea's repeated testing of missiles and nuclear weapons. In response, Beijing has joined the international community to impose tighter sanctions against Pyongyang under the mandate of the UN Security Council. It has affected North Korea's economy to some extent and, no doubt, has caused strains in the bilateral relations. Furthermore, China is interested in jointly building an economic corridor connecting Northeastern China with Rason port in North Korea. But it is not possible without reforms in economic and foreign policy affairs of North Korea.

Evolving Major Power Competition

The Korean Peninsula issue is intertwined with the evolving dynamics of major power competition in Northeast Asia. While Kim Jong-un is looking for China's support to deal with the US pressure, China could use North Korea as a card in its geopolitical competition with the US. The independence movement in Taiwan and the Trump Administration's passing of the Taiwan Travel Act are cases affecting Beijing's core interest. Also, the issue of arms sale to Taiwan by the US is part of the evolving dynamics in the region. In this strategic environment, North Korea needs China's support to strengthen its position in relation with the US. This interdependence is articulated as the "common strategic choice" and the "only correct choice" under the current situation.^{xliv} Both China and North Korea have high stakes involved in the game.

In September 2017, Chinese Ambassador to the United Kingdom Liu Xiaoming argued that China does not hold the "master key" to the North Korean crisis. Liu refers to the "sense of insecurity" prevailing in the region due to serious mistrust between North Korea and the US.^{xlv} Again, on April 5, 2018, Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi told a news conference in Moscow that the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue is closely connected to the "security threat" facing North Korea. Beijing articulates that the process of denuclearisation in the Korean Peninsula should address the North Korea's security concerns under the proposed dual-track approach.^{xlvi} This is the key safeguard that North Korea is looking for.

Although China has proposed the establishment of a peace mechanism, winning support of North Korea depends on establishing a mechanism that guarantees its regime survival and

security. As a result, the Trump Administration's concession to North Korea to alleviate the latter's insecurity is a critical issue according to the Chinese perspective. Moreover, denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula covers the deployment of US' nuclear assets in South Korea as well.

On the one hand, by opposing deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile system in South Korea, China has reaffirmed that it cannot avoid acting on the Korean nuclear crisis. From Chinese perspective, developments in the Korean Peninsula are intrinsically linked to China's security and regional stability. Therefore, Beijing welcomed South Korean President Moon Jae-in's visit to China in December 2017 to pledge for a 'new start' following the deployment of THAAD system. Meanwhile, it is observed that Beijing is also worried about establishment of a regional missile defence system and formation of a defence alliance involving the US, South Korea and Japan.^{xlvii}

In terms of major power relations, China-Russia strategic partnership is directed against the US predominance and to maintain global strategic stability. China and Russia have agreed to promote stability of the "surrounding areas" of the two countries.^{xlviii} On May 22, 2017, Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou and Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov of Russia held consultation in Moscow. The two sides reaffirmed the stance of not allowing wars and chaos in the Korean Peninsula and opposed any party escalating the tension.^{xlix} It was aimed at restraining all the parties involved. In addition, both China and Russia expressed strong opposition to the deployment of the THAAD and presence of "extra-regional forces" in the region.¹ This statement underscores the major power competition among China, the US and Russia over the Korean Peninsula issue.

Conclusion

Kim's surprise visit to China in the new scenario provides an opportunity for Beijing to remain relevant in the future developments of Korean Peninsula. However, the timing of Kim's China visit after he managed to get an agreement from President Trump for a Summit provides an advantage for Pyongyang in setting the tone of the new dynamics of North Korea-China relations. Kim's diplomatic manoeuvring yet again proves North Korea's ability to manipulate the condition of existing strategic competition between great powers by securing the support from China. North Korea is now in a better position to deal with the upcoming negotiations with South Korea and the United State. The situation also allows North Korea to be less susceptible to Trump's pressure tactics. The new dynamics in North Korea-China relations would also force Seoul and Washington to rethink about the approach to the upcoming Summits with North Korea. With the revamping of China-North Korea relations, Pyongyang is less isolated and has more options.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

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The DPRK committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and returning, at an early date, to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to IAEA safeguards. The United States affirmed that it has no nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula and has no intention to attack or invade the DPRK with nuclear or conventional weapons.

The ROK reaffirmed its commitment not to receive or deploy nuclear weapons in accordance with the 1992 Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, while affirming that there exist no nuclear weapons within its territory.

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